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PP RUEHDBU  
DE RUEHKB #0302/01 1050853  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY BAKU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1053  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3335  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
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RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000302

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC, DAS BRYZA

E.O. 12958:DECL: 04/15/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#) [AJ](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: AZIMOV ON TURKEY-ARMENIA PROCESS

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse, Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Envoy on Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) Araz Azimov addressed an exclusive group of diplomats, academics, parliamentarians and commentators on the Turkey-Armenia situation at MFA's Diplomatic Academy on Friday, April 10. In a nearly three-hour meeting with limited give-and-take, Azimov went well beyond the GOAJ's canned talking points in his analysis and hit consistently on these themes: that an "uncontrolled process," i.e., one that does not coordinate steps on N-K with the border opening, will place at risk all that Turkey, the United States and Azerbaijan have achieved over the years and have unpredictable social consequences in Azerbaijan; that Russia gains standing in the region whether the Turkey-Armenia initiative succeeds or fails, and that Azerbaijan could abide by the border opening if it were coordinated with the withdrawal of Armenian troops from five of the seven occupied territories, and other conditions (see paragraph 5.) Azimov and other speakers were certain that POTUS will not unilaterally recognize Armenia's genocide claim this year. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Azimov argued that Turkey's apparent decision to de-link its normalization process from its support for Azerbaijan on N-K places the Turkey-Azerbaijan historic partnership - on which a significant portion of European and American interests in the region rely - at serious risk. Turkey - and by extension the United States - should not forget their allies in Baku. He warned that the social consequences if Azerbaijanis perceive that Turkey has sold them out would be difficult to predict or control.

¶3. (C) However, Azimov in this private setting was more moderate than the one-dimensional presentation of the GOAJ's position in the media would lead one to expect, buoyed by recent statements by PM Erdogan and President Gul that suggested that Turkey would not open its border without a resolution to N-K, and (in the case of Gul) that Turkey expects Armenia to agree to a withdrawal from five territories in conjunction with the Turkish border opening. (Note: This was a reference to a report indirectly quoting Gul in the Turkish paper Milliyet. When Ambassador Derse met her Turkish counterpart the same afternoon as this event, he claimed not to have heard of this statement. End Note.) The senior Turkish Embassy representative, a counselor from the political section, repeated when he was called upon for a response Erdogan's statement that Turkey would neither open the border nor open diplomatic relations with Armenia until N-K is dealt with.

¶4. (C) Azimov was backed up in his assertion that the Turkey-Armenia situation played to Russia's advantage, no

matter what its result, by Samad Seyidov, a member of parliament and chairman of the Azerbaijani delegation to PACE. Azimov believed that Russia would benefit from open Armenian borders because of the depth of its penetration of the Armenian economy and because it opens new potential lines of communication to its military outposts in Armenia. Conversely, a failure in the process of normalization would also benefit Russia because it would cement its position as the protector of Armenia. Seyidov concurred, saying that it is inconceivable that Armenia would proceed without Russia's "invisible permission," and pointedly remarking that Russia is playing the situation much more cleverly than is the United States. Other speakers speculated that Russia could use the situation eventually to insinuate its troops as peacekeepers under a final arrangement, if Turkey needed Moscow's influence in Yerevan to guarantee an Armenian concession to put out the political fires in Azerbaijan.

15. (C) Although he avoided the question when it was put to him directly by Norwegian Ambassador Jon Ramberg, Azimov's bottom line seemed to be that Azerbaijan would consider that Turkey had properly looked after Baku's interests if Armenia's withdrawal from five of the seven occupied territories, Armenian withdrawal from southern Kelbajar and a definition of the Lachin corridor were guaranteed.

16. (C) Comment. Azimov is a hardliner on NK who often stakes out maximalist GOAJ positions, almost certainly with President Aliyev's tacit approval. His position on liberation of five territories is not surprising, given that Aliyev has told EUR DAS Matthew Bryza that liberation of the five territories should remain "an option," as we pursue a 3 plus one deal on the outstanding four points in the Basic Principles. Azimov clearly recognizes that for Azerbaijan to seek more would be excessive, because even before the Turkish situation arose the GOAJ had planned to open its own border with Armenia once the latter withdrew from five territories - it could hardly insist that Turkey do more.

17. (C) Comment continued. Azimov cautioned about the "unpredictable" public response to the Turkey-Armenia situation. To date the signs of pressure on Turkish interests are easy to detect but also easy to trace to the GOAJ. Turkish Ambassador Kilic told Ambassador Derse, also on April 10, that Turkish businessmen were being called in to the Ministry of Taxes to "discuss their views" on the Armenian situation, and that university students - some 5,000 Turks study in Azerbaijan - were under pressure to sign petitions denouncing the border opening. The Presidential Apparatus is also organizing NGOs of all stripes to circulate and deliver petitions to the Turkish Embassy. On April 13, the first demonstration took place at the Turkish Embassy, although it was small and peaceful. It appears that up to now the GOAJ is calibrating its response to show the Turks a sample of what it is capable of (independent of public outrage that could also follow an actual opening of the border) without overplaying its hand as it leans on Turkey to deliver on N-K while it reaches out to Armenia.

DERSE